

## Today's Contemplative Prayer Forms: Are They Contemplation?

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A simpler title could be: Contemplation and today's contemplative prayer—are they the same or different? And, if different, what is their content and how are they related? This paper attempts a clarification of terms.

But more than semantics is involved. The deeper question at issue is: What are we doing when we practice contemporary forms of contemplative prayer, such as centering prayer or the “Christian Meditation” of John Main? Are we praying actively, calling on our human resources under the impulse of grace, or are we submitting passively to some presumed action of God within us, such as infused contemplation that is too subtle to recognize? Do these prayer forms presume we have reached a state of contemplation beyond the level of ordinary meditation? Or may anyone, beginner or experienced, take them up? Or, bluntly, could our silence and quietude, our disengagement from the work of imagination and intellect in our prayer, be an exercise in woolgathering, daydreaming, spinning our wheels, and thus wasting time by willful inactivity? Worse still, could we be falling into the error of quietism, cultivating idleness and passivity, with nothing going on inside? This error gave contemplative prayer a bad name from the 17th century to the beginning of the 20th. It could crop up again today.

What do we mean by contemplative prayer and contemplation? For many writers the two terms are interchangeable and their content is variable, running the gamut of mental prayer from ordinary meditation to

infused contemplation. John Main, the architect of Christian Meditation, begins a series of talks by saying, “I am using the term meditation as synonymous with contemplation, contemplative prayer, meditative prayer, and so forth.”<sup>1</sup> Sometimes the two terms mean infused contemplation, the classical mystical experience of the felt presence of God, as in the following: “Whenever I experienced contemplative prayer, there was absolutely no doubt that I was in God's presence. The silence was of varying degrees, sometimes so deep that the mind could not even think, other times a bit more shallow as in the prayer of quiet.”<sup>2</sup> In other places the words are used more fluidly and less restrictively, as in the very title of William H. Shannon's article—“Contemplative Prayer, Contemplation”—in the *New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*. This article equates the two and surveys their historical development in a variety of meanings. Thomas Keating follows this usage in referring to centering prayer, perhaps the most popular form of contemplative prayer in the United States today, equating the two as a resting in God that is open to all seekers of goodwill.

As a step toward defining the two terms in their contemporary context, I propose a distinction between contemplative prayer and contemplation: Contemplative prayer is the way, contemplation the terminus. The distinction is an inadequate one, for there is certainly an intimate and organic connection between the way and the goal; one includes the other. Contemplative prayer is designed to

achieve contemplation; what begins as contemplative prayer quickly becomes contemplation. But I make the distinction for clarity's sake, not just to be splitting hairs.

Contemplative prayer begins with one's own activity, however simple and nondiscursive; and it seeks silence before God, silent presence beyond thinking, imagining, and making affections. Edwina Gateley has seized the genius of this contemplative prayer in the following psalm titled "Let Your God Love You":<sup>3</sup>

|                 |                   |                  |
|-----------------|-------------------|------------------|
| Be silent       | Let your God      | He only wants to |
| Be still        | Look upon you.    | Look upon you    |
| Alone. Empty.   | That is all.      | With his love.   |
| Before your God | He knows.         | Quiet.           |
| Say nothing     | He understands.   | Still.           |
| Ask nothing.    | He loves you with | Be.              |
| Be silent.      | An enormous love. | Let your God     |
| Be still        |                   | Love you.        |

This poetic catalogue intimates what happens when people practice centering prayer or Christian Meditation. Are these prayer forms contemplation? Yes; they seek and find the experience of God's love and presence, and this is contemplation in the general sense. Neither prayer form directly describes the experience of classical infused contemplation.

William Johnston shows great insight in seeing the typical forms of today's contemplative prayer as neither Eastern nor Western, but something new in the world, "a third way, a *tertium quid*,... the Gospel of Jesus Christ in a new world." He lists some of the methods and then relates them to mystical prayer in the strict sense:

...For the fact is that everywhere we see Christians of all ages and cultures sitting quietly in meditation. Some sit before a crucifix or an ikon in one-pointed meditation. Others sit and breathe as they look at the tabernacle. Others practice mindfulness, awareness of God in their surroundings. Others recite the mantra to the rhythm of their own breath. Others, influenced by Zen or yoga or *vipassana*, open their minds

and hearts to the presence of God in the universe. Others just talk to God. ...

Assuredly these ways cannot immediately be called mystical. But they are gateways to mysticism. They all lead to silence and to the wordless state that St. Teresa calls the prayer of quiet [and] to the higher mansions.<sup>4</sup>

William Johnston has thus related contemplative prayer to contemplation in a heuristic fashion and with a distinction. Today's methods of contemplative prayer are not automatically mystical, but are steps in that direction. The word *contemplation* has no clear boundaries in common usage today.

Contemplation is generally a broader and less precise category than infused contemplation in the strict sense. Contemplation in the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius, for example, is more inclusive than Teresa's prayer of quiet or John of the Cross's infused knowledge and love. William McNamara's well-known description of contemplation as "a long, loving look at the real" fits the contemplative prayer forms Johnston refers to above (and fits infused contemplation as well). The phrase appealed to the Jesuit Walter Burghardt because of its down-to-earth, fully human, and existential quality. It became the title of his famous article on contemplation, which is a moving reflection, not on the contemplation of Teresa or John, but about the bodily, emotional, and spiritual awareness of concrete singulars in creation and their rootedness in God.<sup>5</sup> It is the "mindfulness" Johnston mentions.

### Infused Contemplation

There are exceptions to this generic usage. In the Carmelite and Dominican traditions, contemplation means infused contemplation. Occasionally, of course, writers within these traditions use the term in a broader sense. But, in Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, contemplation is specific and exclusive. It is the general, loving, obscure experience of God that begins with the passive dark night of the senses. It is

infused knowledge and love; it is mystical; it is a pure gift of God that cannot be achieved by human effort under the ordinary working of grace. There are other forms of infused contemplation in the strict sense besides this apophatic experience, but all of them have in common their passive and mystical quality.

In today's spiritual theology the distinction between active and passive prayer tends to be downplayed. Long ago Thomas Merton rejected the distinction between infused and acquired contemplation as being irrelevant. The experience is the thing, not an abstract explanation of its principles. Moreover, the mystical or grace character of the entire spiritual life is being emphasized in many sectors, for example, in twelve-step spirituality and in writings inspired by Karl Rahner's theology.

For Karl Rahner, all experience of God is the expression of faith and love, all of it is rightly called mystical, and all knowledge and love of God are infused. Not only prayer experiences, but even the mundane experiences of average Christians which are products of faith are movements of the Holy Spirit and constitute "ordinary mysticism" or the "mysticism of everyday life." In Rahner's view, what has been designated as infused contemplation in the tradition is a high degree of the one basic experience of a loving faith. The classical mystical experience of the saints remains "extraordinary," not because of its principles, but because of its perfection and rarity. Theologically, the experience of God in meditation or in human activity or in classical infused contemplation is the same one gift of God working within us, the same one reality, different not in kind but in degree.

In the light of this Rahnerian theology, the question raised in this paper is less urgent: the contemplative prayer forms are contemplation in one or the other sense, broad or strict, ordinary or extraordinary, and the two outcomes are only different degrees of the same one gift of God. Our question remains

valid, however, because the two kinds of contemplation remain distinct experiences.

Rahner's theology does not erase the considerable differences between the two on the experiential level, and this is the terrain of our inquiry. We are asking questions that are important for spiritual direction, whatever the explanations offered by systematic theology.

Rahner does make the immense contribution of helping us to see the spiritual life as a unity and to think in terms of process, development, and transitions. Contemplative prayer and contemplation fit into the four steps of *lectio divina*. The first three steps—reading, meditation, prayer—are obviously active; and the fourth step, contemplation, indicates rest, quiet, and passivity. Where does the contemplative prayer we are discussing, fit in this conspectus? I like to locate it between the third and fourth steps. It is a specially designed form of active prayer, consisting in simplified efforts to quiet down, to be attentive, and to be open to the divine influence. But it is rightly called "contemplative," since it anticipates and moves as quickly as possible to its terminus of resting in the Lord. In this perspective it is easy to see why most writers identify contemplative prayer and contemplation as the same thing. One of the classic definitions of the fourth step of *lectio divina* comes from the 12th-century *Ladder of the Monks* by Guigo II, which describes contemplation as happening "when the mind is in some sort lifted up to God and held above itself, so that it tastes the joys of everlasting sweetness."<sup>6</sup> This flowery language can well be describing infused contemplation; but it is also obvious that, as the term of the process of *lectio divina*, it is an ordinary experience at prayer.<sup>7</sup>

## Meditation and Contemplation

Further light can be thrown on the nature of contemporary contemplative prayer if we look at the traditional Catholic teaching about meditation and contemplation. Does

contemplative prayer in the form of centering prayer or Christian Meditation belong to meditation or to contemplation as these words are used in the Catholic tradition? Meditation is active prayer, discursive in method, controlled by the practitioner, and available to all persons of goodwill. Contemplation is knowledge by way of love, the fruit of a search, the experience of God's love poured forth in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given us (see Rm 5:5). Contemplation is given, as pure gift, when the person is disposed to receive it. These descriptions leave intact what we have said about the two kinds of contemplation.

Jurgen Moltmann offers an analysis of meditation and contemplation that clarifies the distinction. Meditation, for Moltmann, is reflection on the cross, the paschal mystery, the gospel message of Christ-for-us. Contemplation too is biblical and Christological because it is the awareness of the knowledge and love evoked in oneself by this reflection, and hence it is a return to self-awareness. Contemplation is the awareness of Christ-in-us. He writes:

I understand by meditation the loving, sympathetic, and participatory recognition of something, and by contemplation the reflecting coming to awareness of oneself in this meditation. He who meditates sinks himself in the object of his meditation. He is absorbed in it and "forgets himself." The object of his meditation in turn sinks itself in him. Then in contemplation he comes again to self-awareness. He registers the changes in himself.<sup>8</sup>

Contemplation, accordingly, is the experience of what God is doing in my own being in Christ. It is what is left over in my body, soul, and spirit as the aftermath of my meditation. There are moments of contemplation in every meditation. Such moments, prolonged and deliberately indulged to the exclusion of further meditation (that is, further thinking, imagining, or making affections), are what the contemporary methods mean by contemplation. They are the fourth act in *lectio divina*, pursued directly

and immediately as the total intent of the prayer.

In this frame of reference, we can see that centering prayer and Christian Meditation do not fit handily in the category of either meditation or contemplation. They are something new in contemplative prayer practice. Thomas Keating has emphasized that centering prayer is not *lectio divina*, but a form of prayer designed to give new life to *lectio* and to the whole Christian life. Centering prayer is one's own doing, but it is contemplative in its very structure. It is ordered directly to the heart of the matter, contemplation itself. It depends on but it is contemplative the prior endowment of grace, the divine indwelling, and the presence of faith, hope, and charity. One needs to have put on the Lord Jesus Christ through the word of God heard, appropriated, and welcomed through the agency of meditation in its many forms, through liturgy and common prayer, through community, and through spiritual discipline. Centering prayer or any legitimate form of contemplative prayer comes along to harvest the fruits, fine-tune the process of Christian living, highlight the gift aspect of the whole journey, and give one rest and enjoyment in this new life in Christ. Centering prayer pulls the spiritual life together and goes far beyond "morsels of spirituality," John of the Cross's phrase for the moments of contemplation that are the fruit of active meditation or are the underlying grace in psychic phenomena like visions and locutions.

### **Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross**

How does this analysis relate to the teaching of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross? Teresa's "active recollection," which she developed out of her own life experience and, in *The Way of Perfection* (chaps. 28-29), described in doctrinal terms as simple presence to God, is a transitional prayer form

that is between meditation and contemplation and is very similar to modern contemplative prayer.<sup>9</sup> Active recollection is the equivalent of centering prayer, the image or memory from the gospel focusing, for Teresa, a person's attention, just as the mantra does in centering prayer. For Teresa, in the Fourth Mansions, contemplation begins with passive recollection or the prayer of quiet, both of which are mystical. In the imagery of the waters, contemplation happens when the bucket or aqueduct is no longer necessary because the water bubbles up from an inner spring. Active recollection is the personal cultivation and enjoyment of the divine presence through one's own efforts. It is the door to the mystical prayer of quiet and union, as indeed are centering prayer and Christian Meditation in due time.

John of the Cross has no explicit counterpart to Teresa's active recollection or to the new forms of contemplative prayer. For him, the first fruits of contemplation are experienced in the passive dark night of the senses, when the person cannot pray in the old ways, finds no satisfaction in any particular goods, and has a profound yearning for God. Before that time one is to use one's faculties in the practice of meditation. John has no transitional form between meditation and contemplation; the pray-er is praying one or the other. He does counsel simple attention or loving awareness at the onset of the dark night. While it is tempting to identify this practice with our contemplative prayer, the advice applies to a different situation. The simple attention presupposes the presence of God's special action infusing light and love in a subtle way, at times so subtle that the divine action may go unrecognized.<sup>10</sup> We are dealing with the beginning of infused contemplation in the strict sense. The three signs will validate its presence, and the person gives a loving attention that is passive, "without efforts ... as a person who opens his eyes with loving attention."<sup>11</sup> For John of the

Cross, contemplation is pure gift and simply received; there is no room for active collaboration. John's contemplation is not the immediate horizon of contemporary contemplative prayer forms.<sup>12</sup>

## Concluding Observations

Throughout this paper we have seen that contemplative prayer and contemplation have two levels or degrees of perfection, which we have designated as ordinary and extraordinary, or general and infused. Their identity depends on how fully they emanate from the human heart, which is the seat of all valid prayer. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* describes the role of the heart in these words:

...The heart is our hidden center, beyond the grasp of our reason and of others; only the Spirit of God can fathom the human heart and know it fully. The heart is the place of decision, deeper than our psychic drives. It is the place of truth, where we choose life or death. It is the place of encounter, because as image of God we live in relation; it is the place of covenant. (§2563)

In John of the Cross, the level of the heart is the realm of the spirit (as opposed to the sensibility). It is the ground of our being, the fine point of the soul, the center that holds our whole being, the place where God dwells within us. It is not a physical place, but a level of our operation in which God is the agent and we are receivers. God comes in fullness when we are empty and pure of heart. God comes in proportion to our openness, our freedom, our poverty of spirit. God as Holy Spirit possesses us and forms us in the image of the Son. This is the work of grace within us. The Spirit is operative in all good actions and completely takes over when we are acting on the level of the spirit, when we let go of ourselves in some complete fashion. This action of God within us is contemplation, and it takes place in proportion to our poverty of spirit. This poverty of spirit is practically the same thing as the contemplation itself.

Centering prayer and Christian Meditation are more fully prayer from the heart than discursive prayer is. They attempt to move the spiritual life to deeper levels than exterior, psychic, or conceptual activity. They take their practitioners to the center, to true, authentic, and mature spirituality beyond mere sensibility. But, unlike infused contemplation in the strict sense, they are not mystical or fully passive forms; they have an active element, and they depend on human collaboration.

The dynamics of centering prayer and Christian Meditation are similar, but they differ in emphasis. Both call the person to enter within, to move to the realm of silence and solitude, the level of the heart, to let go of thinking and imagining or controlling and to cultivate simple presence to the Divine Presence. One is lovingly attentive to the Divine Indwelling.

Centering prayer suggests the saying of the mantra, some simple word like *Jesus*, as a way to express consent to God's working in the soul. It is the response to God's love, accepting and welcoming the action of God. The mantra as a sign of consent is to be used to focus attention as needed.

In Christian Meditation, the mantra—which is usually the word *Ma-ra-na-tha* (“Come, Lord Jesus”)—is spoken throughout the prayer as an effort, not only to be totally attentive, but to be empty and silent and alone before God. The mantra is the instrument that creates the emptiness; it hollows out the soul.

Meditation takes seriously the teaching of the masters that creating silence and emptiness is the best invitation to the Spirit. In the dyad of poverty and contemplation, Christian Meditation goes through the door of poverty. Centering prayer takes the other door of simple, loving presence to God. In the end the two methods are searching for the same fullness and emptiness.

My sense is that other popular forms of contemplative prayer follow the same lines that we have drawn for the two exemplars. These prayer forms are gifts for our time, making more available the entrance to a deeper life with God. A figure from twelve-step experience may help us understand the widespread attraction of these new forms of contemplative prayer and at the same time serve as a bridge to St. John of the Cross. The figure is this: It used to be said that a person had to “hit bottom” before he or she would be a candidate for the twelve-step program. Today, I am told, clients are advised to “raise the bottom” and begin the program before a crisis occurs. Something like this may be working in contemplative prayer today. The forms do not presuppose infused contemplation or even an advanced spiritual state. They teach the person to be appropriately active in the prayer, and they promise a fuller outpouring of the Spirit. In this time of ours, contemporary contemplative prayer forms are a providential gift of the Holy Spirit.

<sup>1</sup> *Talks on Meditation* (Montreal, 1979), p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> Philip St. Romain, in the newsletter “Christian Prayer and Contemplation Forum,” no. 8 (April 1997): 4. Address: Chiloquin, Oregon 97624.

<sup>3</sup> From *There Was No Path So I Trod One: Poems* (page 17) by Edwina Gateley, copyright © 1996 by Edwina Gateley. Reprinted with permission of the publisher: Source Books; Box 794; Trabuco Canyon, California 92678.

<sup>4</sup> *Mystical Theology* (London: Harper Collins, 1995), p. 134.

<sup>5</sup> Walter J Burghardt, “Contemplation, a Long, Loving Look at the Real,” in *Church 5* (Winter 1989): 14-17.

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- <sup>6</sup> Cited in Lawrence S. Cunningham and Keith J. Egan, *Christian Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), pp. 93-94.
- <sup>7</sup> A Monk of New Clairvaux, *Don't You Belong to Me?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), pp. 114-149.
- <sup>8</sup> "Theology of Mystical Experience," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 32 (1980): 505. Moltmann cites Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, and *The Cloud of Unknowing* for these distinctions, and also J.V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God* (London, 1972), whose revealing thesis is that "the thought of the awareness of awareness [is] an experience of the Holy Spirit."
- <sup>9</sup> The present author has discussed Teresa's early personal prayer style in "St. Teresa of Avila and Centering Prayer," *Carmelite Studies* 3 (Washington: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1984), pp. 191-211.
- <sup>10</sup> According to Max Huot de Longchamp, the subtlety of the grace of infused contemplation is partially due to the fact that the infused light and love go directly to the object without any return to the self. Huot gives a convincing analysis of St. John of the Cross for this opinion. Infused contemplation in this view does not find its full explanation in the analysis of Moltmann above. See *Saint Jean de la Croix: Pour Lire le Docteur Mystique* (Paris: Fac-editions, 1991), p. 164.
- <sup>11</sup> *Living Flame* 3.33.
- <sup>12</sup> The dark night is the entree to the infused contemplation of John of the Cross. But even the dark night has a wide sense that does not include the presence of contemplation as described in the third sign of *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* 2.13.4, according to James Arraj in a tape titled "Are There Contemplatives Today?" and published by his own Inner Growth Ministries in Chiloquin, Oregon. Without that express contemplation, the person experiencing the dark night needs to make acts of faith and love and not be simply idle in the prayer. This is to avoid the error of quietism. There is no contradiction here to the conclusions of this paper.